

Government Faces Backlash Over Planned SEND Overhaul Amid Fears of Rights Erosion

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The UK government is facing mounting resistance from campaigners, parents, and education experts over its proposed overhaul of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system. Critics warn the changes could restrict children's legal rights to support and place further strain on already overstretched local authorities.

The overhaul, which is still under development, has sparked concern that it could reduce the statutory entitlements of over 600,000 children with education, health, and care plans (EHCPs). A group of more than 100 signatories, including campaigners, charities, and celebrities such as Chris Packham and Sally Phillips, has written to ministers urging them not to remove or weaken legal protections for children with SEND. They argue that any attempt to limit support would amount to a rollback of rights enshrined in law.

Fears centre around a controversial “statutory override” mechanism reportedly being considered by officials. This tool could allow ministers to circumvent existing laws to prevent councils from overspending on SEND provision, which is one of the fastest-growing areas of local authority expenditure. While the Department for Education has not confirmed the use of such powers, campaigners say even the possibility represents a dangerous shift in the balance between government control and individual rights.

Parent and campaigner Jane Harris, whose son has SEND, described the proposals as a betrayal of families who rely on the system to secure vital support. She warned that the reforms could result in fewer children receiving the specialist help they need to thrive in school. The letter to ministers also highlighted that delays and bureaucratic hurdles are already preventing thousands of families from accessing timely support.

The SEND system in England has faced sustained criticism for being adversarial, inconsistent, and underfunded. Councils argue they are under financial pressure, with many overspending on high-needs budgets year after year. While the government has pledged to reform the system to make it more sustainable and efficient, campaigners insist that any

changes must maintain children's legal rights and ensure that support remains based on need, not cost.

A Department for Education spokesperson said the government's objective is to improve the quality and consistency of SEND provision and ensure better outcomes for children and families. However, trust remains fragile among families who feel excluded from the reform process.

As discussions continue, the debate highlights the tension between managing public finances and protecting vulnerable children's rights in an increasingly strained education system.